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Leadership in the African Immigrant Community: Conflict and Coalition

By Mfon Ufot

Whenever African immigrants gather, most assuredly the conversation of their plight to the United States, will be a heated topic. Most of the discussion laments the apparent apathy in the African community and the lack of collective leadership to mobilize it. According to the 1990 census, there are over 350,000 African in the United States and that number is increasing every year.¹ The State Department's Information on Immigration reports about 20,000 Africans won the "immigration lottery" to emigrate to the United States last year. This year, about 20,000 slots are allotted to the African continent.² This program is a part of the diversity immigrant visas given to countries with low rates of immigration to the United States. Nevertheless, all 20,000 of the lottery winners may not be able to emigrate to the United States because of stringent requirements by the State Department. It is therefore timely and important to examine the leadership development in the evolving and everchanging African immigrant community already living here, as citizens of the United States.

Community leadership infers the ability to have a vision, interpret that vision, and carry it to fruition. Surely, there are outstanding and successful individuals, organizations, and even businesses in the African immigrant community, which although confronted with serious obstacles, have managed to build strong coalitions that address issues affecting most African-born groups in the U.S. Through personal leadership African-born groups have combined individual efforts to mobilize their community or groups to achieve given goals. Unfortunately, there are also many obstacles to overcome in order to achieve those goals.

Historical Background

In order to understand the obstacles that African immigrants face, one needs to look at the history of the community in the United States, as well as the leadership development on the African continent during the 1950s and 1960s (when many of the countries were fighting for independence). In the 1960s and early 1970s, young Africans came to the U.S. to pursue and complete their education in hopes of returning home where jobs were waiting for them. Many countries invested millions of dollars to finance their citizens' education. Others came independently to pursue their dream of attaining a good education. However, as economic conditions deteriorated in some of their countries, students opted to stay in the United States after graduation, believing their stay would



be a short one. This, of course, was not the case; the economic conditions continued to worsen and many African decided to settle in the U.S. for a while.

For some Africans who studied abroad, the sole reason for returning home was to help develop their communities. But serious efforts made towards African development in the late 1950s and 1960s were bound to be problematic for the future. Their inclination to the European world values was certain to work against African interests. Events in Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan, Liberia, and Rwanda suggested that Black Africa's growing dysfunction could be blamed on Africans while their perpetrators were even created as sympathizers and helpers. But, while many African leaders were fighting for independence from their colonial masters, it was easy for many to lay down their differences, at least for a while, and answer the call of duty. Simply put, a common enemy was identified and when Africans came together, they were able to fight and win their independence; no longer subject to colonial domination. After their success, however, many of the leaders reverted to their old ways of suspicion of one another, a seed sown by the colonial masters. The triumph was still not enough to erase years of strife. The emergence of an African community in the U.S. is, therefore, a by-product of these unfriendly forces.

Reasons for Conflict

Even as we might agree that Africans are catching up with the dynamics of collective leadership within their community, it must also be noted that as settlers, their community structure is quite unstable. For example, while there are many organizations and associations representing ethnic groups and countries, an umbrella organization that advocates for all groups is not readily accessible in the African community. There are some people who believe that the umbrella group may not be necessary at this point and time. They are quick to

indicate that African immigrants are beginning to create opportunities to work together accomplishing specific, defined goals. However, this is only a starting point. To use another example, note that Atlanta is bracing itself for the 1996 Summer Olympics, in which all African countries will be represented. Initially, each of the communities were going to organize events to welcome the athletes from their respective countries, but the organizers realized that many countries would be left with no representation. As a result, the entire African community plans to find ways of supporting their countries but also creating a centralized information network to assist all African athletes.

Even as the community continues its efforts, the pitfalls are clear that may prevent collaboration:

- The clash of cultures: While the American culture glorifies and indeed encourages individual achievement within the umbrella structure, the African tradition emphasizes tribal and ethnic achievements at the community level. Consequently, balancing the two cultures is quite treacherous. Many Africans, while not wanting to disregard the culture they were reared in, are also aware that in order to succeed, they have to adhere to some of the principles of the American culture.
- For many Africans, their first loyalty is to the tribes and then to the state of origin: There have not been any national "movements of pride" linking disparate groups in the last several decades. So when circumstances help to create an environment for African settlers to work together to achieve a goal, it represents a relatively new experience, i.e., to lay down differences and work towards a common goal. As mentioned earlier, the involvement of the colonial masters in the affairs of the African people was designed to divide and create mistrust among the people; there are still manifestations of this legacy.
- African settlers also have to deal with economic insecurity caused by racism and lack of or inability to access the American system: There are many Africans who are highly-educated, but still unable to obtain well-paying jobs. In order to take care of families, they have to take any employment they can find. This creates frustration and anger in many instances.
- Although they come from the same continent, African immigrants have to deal with religious, ethnic, cultural, and even language barriers in order to work together: Sometimes the barriers and conflict may be overwhelming to the leaders. It sometimes seems easier to retreat back to the familiar territory of ethnic groups instead of spending the enormous energy needed to organize such a diverse group. There have been instances where the national body of a country had to disband because the members had chosen to form their ethnic associations instead of working out their differences. The community therefore becomes disjointed with no umbrella organization to unite the people. Another minefield closely linked to this background is the potential conflict between those seen

as the intellectuals versus the non-intellectuals in the community. Many times there may be tensions because one group feels excluded from the activities of the community. As leadership develops, particular attention needs to be paid to these concerns so that all groups are brought to the table to participate.

Coalitions

The African immigrant community is a relatively young one that is coming to grips with its changing role in the U.S. While there may not be an organized community or leadership structure, some people are still emerging as leaders based on their involvement in the African immigrant community. These leaders have been able to organize their communities in times of need. A good example is the annual African Unity Day celebration organized by a local radio station in Atlanta. This event brings people of African descent together to discuss issues of concern to Africa and the diaspora.³ In 1994, the African community, in collaboration with the National Black Arts Festival, organized, "Celebrate Africa," an event that showcased the works of art from Africa and the diaspora.⁴ We are beginning to see more and more of these events where people can come together for a specific purpose. Another example is the establishment of the African Children's Fund. This organization dedicates itself to supporting and fulfilling the needs of African children. This group has successfully networked with many communities and received support from various sources in order to assist African children in a variety of capacities. They have shipped thousands of books and school supplies to Africa for humanitarian and educational causes.⁵

As leadership in the community develops one must pay attention to the similarities among us, but also differences. This fact became apparent as the community organized for the second annual African Unity Day. It was through negotiations and discussions that the format for the event was established. This was a great achievement considering the diversity among the organizers and participants. These successful community efforts will hopefully translate into other community accomplishments on a consistent basis. Events like African Unity Day should be fostered to demonstrate the ability to work together at identifying issues of mutual concern to the community, as well as, mapping out a Pan-Africanist agenda for our future. The community must also become economically and politically savvy.

We must be mindful that every group or person that comes into the community is not there for the best interest of the community. Some see it as a good opportunity to enrich themselves by using the resources in the community. Information and products pertaining to Africa seem to be very popular at this time; and because these things are not easy to come by, many people are aligning themselves with the African community to obtain them. Currently, there is a group attempting to host an African conference. One of the sponsors, according to media information, is said to be an African organization.

Unfortunately, this African organization, for all practical purposes, is non-existent. There are no meetings being held and no activity taken place, however the committee still proclaims the existence of the organization. Furthermore, there are no Africans serving on the organizing committee, at least not in any decision-making positions. Many people blame this problem on the African community's lack of coordinated effort. But that cannot entirely be the case.

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There are two areas that should be addressed in terms of improving the political capacities of emerging leadership; this includes the role of women and second generation Africans in the U.S. This is the right time for the community to redefine the role of women. The male-oriented leadership style in the African community, where women are delegated to work with the children and coordinate social gatherings, have not served the African community well. Those who support the inclusion of women in leadership development see women as the hope to re-establish a strong leadership base here, in the U.S., and the African continent. This role is not strange to African women. Historically, women like Queen Nzinga and Queen Nefretiti, were the military and community leaders of the 18th century. Recently one of the women presidents of an African organization in the U.S. was able to mobilize not only her community, but many other businesses, individuals, and groups in the Atlanta area to raise millions of dollars worth of medical equipment and books.⁶ Furthermore, since African women sometimes marry out of their native tribes, they do not have such strong and unyielding loyalty to those tribes or ethnic groups as most men do. This again, would lend to their ability to be more open-minded in discussing issues that affect the entire African immigrant community and not solely their individual tribes.

The same kind of argument can be made for second generation Africans. Many of these young Africans seem to have the skills to negotiate the treacherous waters of the two cultures. Even in cases where parents attempt to

instill the bias they grew up with, many of the children are choosing lifestyles of their own and do not seem to have the strong bias that is plaguing their parents. For example, two students at an American university may be from the same African country with similar family values. However, these two youngsters may also be from rival ethnic groups, which would cause their parents to disapprove of the friendship. Fortunately second generation children are refusing to be dragged into the ethnic politics of their parents.

As this new community evolves and leaders come and go, we cannot underestimate the power and the importance of linking leadership and agendas to the needs of the grassroots sectors. This linkage will ensure a firm foundation, enthusiasm, and a "checks and balances" system needed to hold leaders accountable as Africans settle in the U.S. We need leaders with a clear vision of where we need to be as a community in this country. We also need leaders who reflect Pan-Africanist thinking and who can rise above their ethnic origins, but also recognize the role that upbringing plays to shape our lives. Leaders must be entrepreneurs who can work with a range of individuals and organizations that all help to mold this budding community into a powerful voice in American and African societies. Those leaders are amongst us now.

Notes

¹Susan J. Lapham, "The Foreign-born Population in the United States: 1990 CPH-L-98," Ethnic and Historic Branch Population Division (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990), 21.

²See Public Notice 23203, "Bureau of Consular Affairs, Registration for the Third Year of Diversity Immigrant Visa Program (DV-97)," (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State, 1996).

³The African Unity Day Celebration was organized to examine issues of greater cooperation and empowerment within the African immigrant community of Atlanta.

⁴"Celebrate Africa" was organized by the African community in partnership with the National Black Arts Festival in Atlanta. This event provided an opportunity to showcase a variety of cultural artifacts and exhibitions on creative work from Africa and the diaspora.

⁵As a consultant to the Africa's Children Fund, I know firsthand the work being done by Victor Mbaba, executive director, and his staff to support African children in the United States and in Africa.

⁶Mrs. Mabel Green, president of Liberian Community in Atlanta, was able to break new grounds where some of her male predecessors failed.

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